By Lt. Brian Anderson

"Montana 430, we think something just fell off your plane," called tower.

Not exactly something you hear from the tower every day, but I wasn't concerned when I heard it. We had seen numerous close encounters with birds that day, a common occurrence at NALF Cabaniss. I figured our good fortune of missing them just had come to an end. I hadn't heard any telltale thump or felt anything unusual, but what else could it have been?

The next call from the tower caused quite a bit of concern. "Montana 430, we believe your right tire fell off your plane after that last touch-and-go."

We hadn't felt anything odd during any of our touch-and-goes, and the gear had retracted normally. I took the controls, extended the gear, and requested a low pass so the tower folks could get a closer look. In the cockpit, the gear indicated three down and locked. Unfortunately, tower's suspicions were correct: We had lost our wheel-and-tire assembly. We climbed into the delta pattern, and I coordinated with another aircraft in the pattern to form up on us and take a closer look. He confirmed the tower's assessment. I still had my strut, brake assembly, and wheel mount, but the tire and wheel were gone.

By this time, word of our situation had spread over base frequency to our duty office, and they were busy coordinating with Raytheon mechs and squadron-instructor pilots. Everyone deliberated on our best course of action.

Meanwhile, we left the delta pattern at Cabaniss and headed for NAS Corpus Christi. At first, some believed our safest course of action was to land gear up. Then, discussion focused on the merits of selecting gear down and landing on the strut-and-brake assembly. Fortunately, we had an hour of gas remaining, which gave our squadron and contract maintenance team time to debate.

Some of our senior flight instructors went to the hangar deck and had maintainers pull a tire-and-wheel assembly off a plane to see what configuration we actually were dealing with.

Though other planes, including the T-44, successfully have landed on struts without lower oleos and tire assemblies, the consensus from the hangar-deck group was the remaining brake assembly was too fragile and would not rotate anyway. Everyone then agreed gear up was the best choice.

The T-44 NATOPS calls for landing gear up when one or more landing gear cannot be extended, but it doesn't specifically cover the situation we faced. When retracted, the T-44 wheels protrude from the bottom of the nacelles. So, during a gear-up landing, the tires support the aircraft, and brakes are available. Because we only had our left wheel, we anticipated a swerve to the right. We made plans to land on the runway's left side.

We also reviewed our egress procedures and decided to exit via the emergency-escape hatch on the starboard side, vice the airstair door. After the egress-procedures brief, we made one more pass over the runway to make sure it was clear, then set up for an extended final and started in for the landing.

NATOPS procedures for a gear-up landing call for the engines to be fuel-chopped immediately before touchdown. We had briefed once we were sure the runway was made, and, at 30 feet (set in the radalt), we would fuel-chop the engines.

At 30 feet and 1,000 feet down the runway, we fuel-chopped the engines, landed left of centerline, and used the left brake to maintain directional control. We skidded 1,700 feet down the runway, and slid 35 feet to the right. Once the plane stopped, we completed the emergency-shutdown-on-deck procedures, and exited without further incident.

A chain of events leads to any mishap. In our situation, external intervention helped break this chain a couple times and lessened the impact of our malfunction. First was the attention to detail that ACAA Nolan Rhodes demonstrated as control-tower safety observer when he saw the tire depart *[see his Bravo Zulu in the May 2003 issue of* Approach*—Ed.]*. We never would have known anything was wrong until we hit the deck the next time around, anticipating a normal touch-and-go.

Second was the initiative and leadership demonstrated by fellow aviators and contract maintainers, who examined the malfunction in the hangar before we had to test it ourselves. This incident emphasizes the importance of looking out for one another, and how CRM, in and out of the cockpit, can intervene in the chain of events to avoid catastrophe.

Lt. Anderson flies with VT-31.